

TR84-51

ART AND COSMOLOGY

Masks: the instruments of metamorphosis

A short study into the relationship between African maskworks, their social structure and the cosmological viewpoint underlying this relationship.

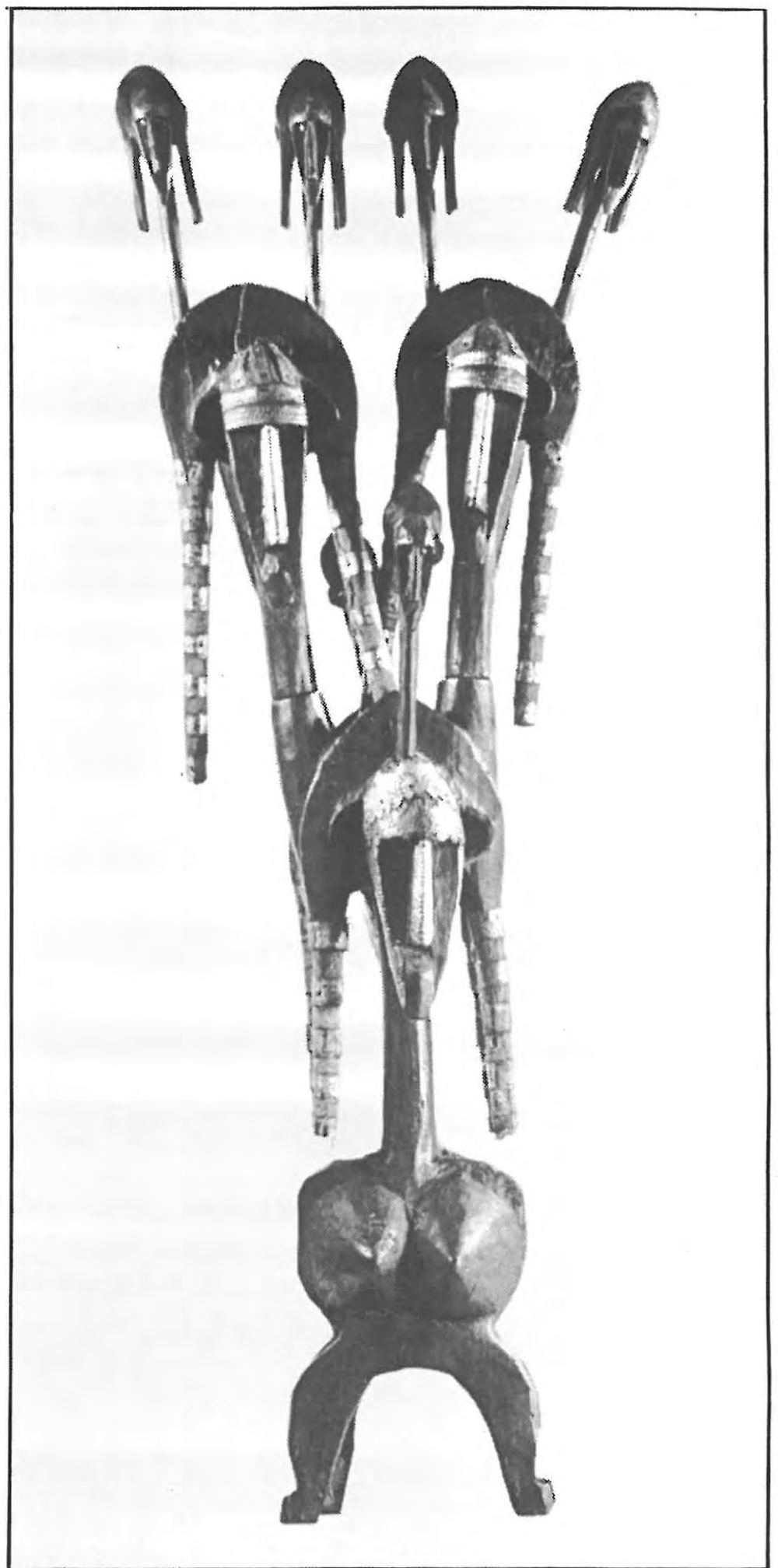
by

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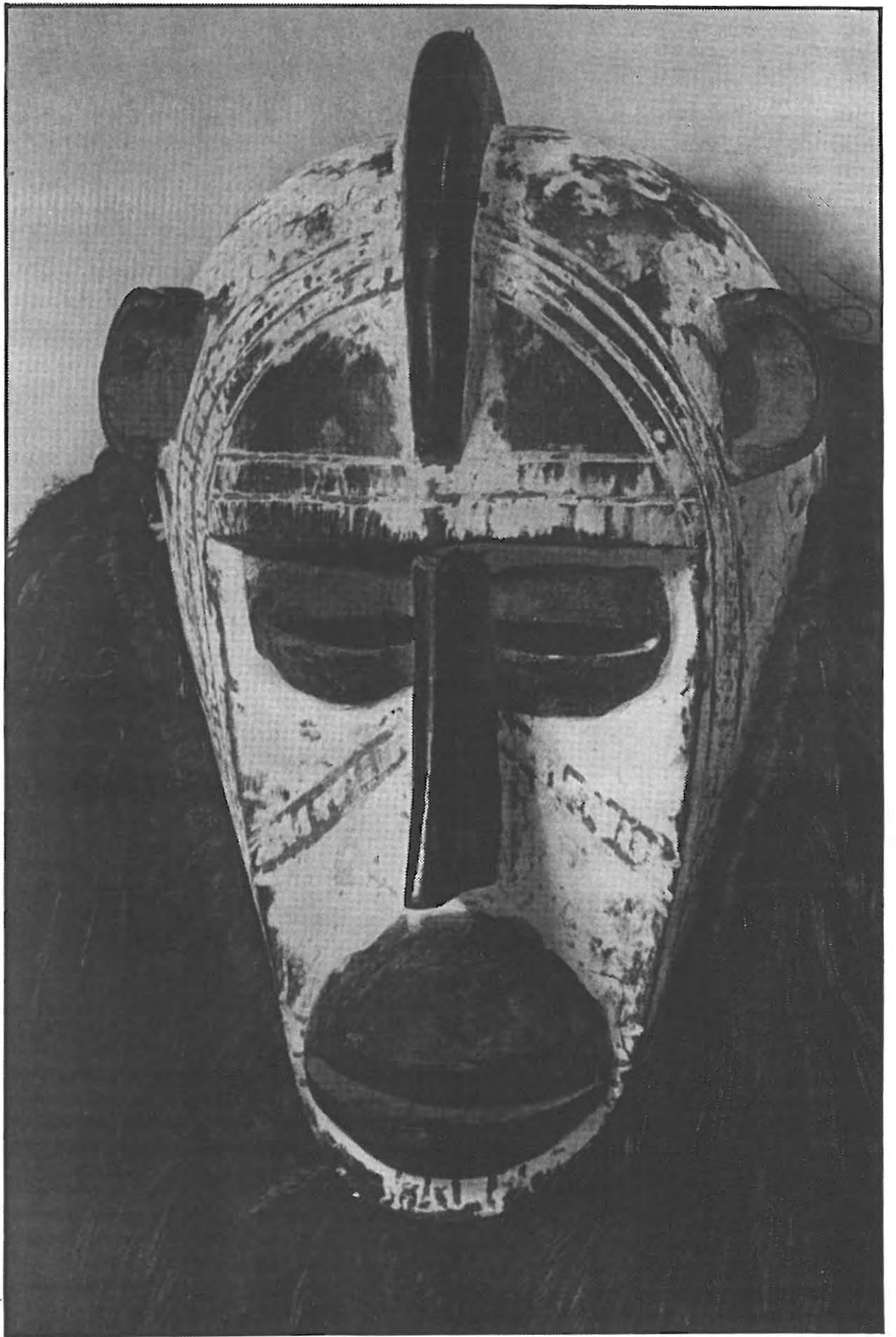
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONSPLATE

- 1        HELMET MASK representing the Do guardian spirit from the Bobo-Fing of Upper Volta. Facial features are contrasted with the facial planes in general giving an element of suffering from the underworld experiences of the spirit.
- 2        BELT MASK from Benin worn in court dress on the left hip and takes either a human or leopard form.
- 3        FULL BODIED MASK from the Bapende used in initiation rites to frighten women and outsiders away from the secret puberty rites. This mask costume gives the wearer overall protection and disguises him fully.
- 4        DANCE MASK this Basonge mask which is a KIFWEBE mask displays strongly inherent vital forces. It is said to embody impersonal spirits or forces used by witchdoctors. Fagg's growth curves, or mathematical exponential curves, are most elegantly illustrated here.
- 5        DANCE MASK a Dogon hornbill mask surmounted by a crownpiece of a standing woman. A strong phallic echo plays between the two protuberances. Each mask is individually named and has a special dance and song of its own.
- 6        DANCE MASK this half-man half-hornbill mask is from the Dan side of the Dan/Ngere complex. Its stern yet benign features echo the nature of the bird and the expression of the human.
- 6a       DANCE MASK the Bambara spirit of KWORE (either lion or hyena) ruling sky and rain is represented here.
- 7        DANCE MASK a so-called 'fire-spitter' mask from the Senufo tribe representing a baboon and used in funerals of society members as well as to combat sorcery. The general impression

is more like the chimpanzee -- perhaps the result of the subconscious overlaying of the human face on that of the baboon.

8 HEADDRESS this Dogon baboon mask seems to have left behind the original material of its form: the baboon, showing the freedom carvers have within the strict boundaries of their trade, a paradoxical situation common in maskwork. Anointed before use it contains iron rings to appease the tree spirit of the wood.

9 SOCIETY MASK the NMWO society of the Ibo controlled the villages in the name of the ancestral spirits. This mask represents a female spirit and is supplemented by varicoloured string garments; they accompany festivals and funerals. Two spirits are represented here, one female and one male, as two distinct masks. The female one is always white on a delicate form with black design imposed. This mask is a classic in the mythical-mystical form as referred to in this essay and represents a cosmology-maintaining device of supreme beauty.



Originally every mask was imbued with significance, and the mask itself, or the person wearing it, mysteriously represented some power or spirit.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

African art has been dominated by the documentary outlook for the majority of its historical life. Later in this essay William Fagg is quoted as saying:

The difficulty in describing or interpreting African art in verbal terms arises largely from the fact that it is in itself on the whole non-descriptive: the things with which it is concerned are the things which are beyond speech, and the artist is expressing things which it would never occur to him to put to words.

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It is after all the way of the artist to express himself in visual terms not in verbal terms. In cultures which have no written tradition the only mode of expression is the visual one and we must take cognisance of this fact. This means that the relationship between men and their art must be entered into and interpreted. The principles underlying the relationship are a matter of the sociological structure of the social group. In order to understand the forms and characteristics of the pieces it is essential to link study of the art works with the study of the social frame-work in which the works are found. In this essay the joining of these two approaches is attempted with the major emphasis being on the social position of the works where it seems to fit best.

Several writers have given some encouragement to this approach in the past. Mainly, the studies presented have centered on the use to which works are put (ie this is a dance mask used in fertility rites) and to the material in which it has been made. The rest covers geographical distributions of both tribes and styles of work. I want to steer in the direction of the former

approach (indicated above) which is to make a closer study of the relationship between mask-work and social rites and motives. The essay will move strongly in this direction, and though this makes the descriptive approach very much second string material, I believe this is a very necessary approach at this time. This discussion attempts to show that 'ritually factored art' (defined later) is form of communication signalling structural relationships to both outsiders and insiders of social groups. Are these artworks not a form of communication, consisting of units strung together, which as a whole, contain a significant structure we call meaning?

#### 1.a. MASKWORK: A GENERAL APPROACH

The mask, as an art form, has been used by many societies throughout the world. Its function has often had a dramatic aspect. The major use being to enact mythical stories important to the social processes of social groups in many parts of the world. In the African situation this has been the case, where the mask is still in use in many areas. As cultural groups the African societies can be termed among the less technologically developed area in the world - the so-called 'primitive' societies. This is despite the several sophistications shown by these groups; sophistications which must be viewed only in context where they are not compared with modern societies against which they appear unsophisticated. The term 'primitive' has been used, and is clouded by, ethnocentric thinkers using their own standards as measuring criteria. This attitude has changed greatly in recent years. Recent developments have led to a more in-depth reading of the art of primitive groups as opposed to that of European modern groups. For convenience the term primitive will be adhered to here.

The art of primitive society has been recognised now as being performed by mature people with an intellect showing clear aesthetic standards and laborious and skilled knowledge of many techniques used in their art forms and in general life. Stricter conventions, than in European art as we have come to know it, are now known to govern the work of primitive artists. Many taboos have, in the past, governed European art forms, these range from sexual to mystical-religious as in the Victorian era where sexual taboos led to a thriving pornographic miniature market. Similar taboos are not comprehensible in non-european art without deep study into the aesthetics of Black African art. (The aesthetic might be dependant on the social mores, as one can speculate that the taboo, or social rule, will have preceded the aesthetic. Not that this is necessarily true as it is mere speculation which is difficult to verify.) This is the manner in which this art should be viewed. In addition to the aesthetic rules governing the form of art pieces, there are influences brought in by master craftsmen who pass stylistic forms on to their apprentices.

The motive of the primitive artist is not completely different from that of European modern or ancient artists. The artist works to create beauty, for profit, or simply through vocation as a social role. But, the similarities between what we call primitive art and that of modern or civilized art systems are greater than they may appear. The task of indicating the sophistication of so-called primitive art is not a great one, and can therefore be taken for granted in the light of the post-Victorian outlook which sees this art as well conceived and performed. (3)

The man-made article used in enactments of a social-religious nature is considered as ritually factored, or loaded. Masks are ritually factored objects which perform an important function in the art of primitive groups, and it is this function that this discussion touches on. The aesthetics and sculptural forms used to give this art its uniqueness. It is unclear, and difficult to determine, whether the ceremonial created these rules and forms or the other way around. Which came first, the aesthetic, or the physical form? Was the ritual factored object first or was the form of ritual as a mystical function in social groups? A strong likelihood is that the two, the aesthetic and the physical form, developed alongside each other. This is the most likely, in any case, as they are inextricable from each other they must be evaluated together.

The attempt here is to overview mask forms in African groups and the manner in which they relate, as a general phenomenon, to society. The study will split into two general sections, the first portion dealing with the physical form of the mask, and the second, and greater portion, dealing with the mask and its inter-relationship with society.

Art as a method of conveying a visual rendering of an attitude to the condition of the world and its social, political and religious activity, has a strong relationship with the mythical-mystical outlook of the groups men form. This outlook will be termed the cosmological outlook. The art referred to will be man-made carvings utilized as an indicative device in social structures, or, for the enactment of the social-religious outlook in theatrical performances. The outlook enacted can be related to

the cosmological outlook referred to above. Cosmology is the way in which man explains the universe as a structure. The underlying significance of ritual factored objects is the relation of man to the universe. It can be likened to a display of the ideas on the universe as an entity believed to have some bearing on the form and fate of the earthly world. The ritual factored artefact is a mode of communication in the primitive groups intended to convey a meaning or an attitude held by a portion or the whole of the society. The structure of society (in primitive terms) is arguably modelled on the same lines as the religious worldview and the structure contained in this. They could be seen as tandem units. Life in primitive society is also seen as being an intergral part of their environment, and not separate as in modern European society. This integration has probably led to the correspondence that exist between the idea of the cosmological 'social' structure and that of the group. The cosmological 'society' is made up of gods and demons believed to govern and influence the world of men and the actions of men (witches and saints). As suggested above this integration is diminished in modern society in that modern man's creative problem-solving characteristics allow him to dictate his own ends to a great degree and even to disallow the existence of extraterrestrial influences. Modern man looks increasingly towards scientific explanations for the condition of life, while a philosophical outlook often takes second place. This is not to say that the philosophical outlook is not found it is merely of diminishing importance to modern society.

Modern man tends to view myth as a fictional story woven around the activities of extraterrestrial beings. Whereas, primitive

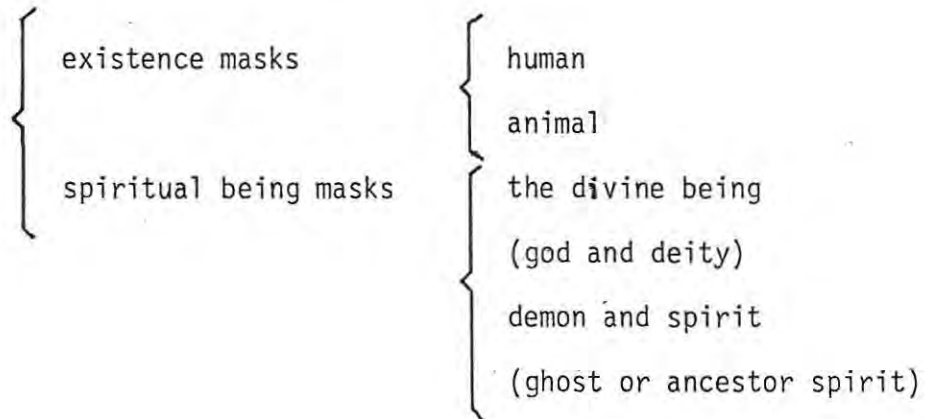
man regards the myth as an historical element of his living culture.

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## CHAPTER 2: SOME CATEGORIES FOR MASKWORK

The mask has been used mainly for spiritual and figurative (metaphorical) purposes, in addition to the secular or decorative 'apparel' and non-figurative ones. The major use of masks is in the creation of the symbolic universes of man, his cosmology in other words. The religious and spiritual milieu finds its place in the masquerades and other dramatic representations of the social group, most of which are of a religious-spiritual nature. In the catalogue of the Tenri Sankokan Museum, in Japan, the following structure is given:<sup>+</sup>



Masks fall into the above categories and take on the forms noted here: therianthropic (combining human and animal forms), anthropomorphic and zoomorphic. They are found as artificial face masks, which will provide the wearer with a transformation, and representative art masks which might not be worn as a mask, but yet will have a mask's shape while being ornamental or decorative in effect.

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Unfortunately this catalogue is entirely in Japanese, with the exception of certain keywords which appear in English. These keywords form the structure of the next few pages of this text, expansions on these keywords are by myself. This presents a problem of accreditation, but it can be accepted that the remainder of this section is a dual effort with great reliance on the Japanese catalogue for its structure.

## 2.a. FIGURATION OF MASKS

Masks take on several 'types' or shapes:

1. Full face masks and maskettes (half-masks). Full face masks would be worn on the face and its form is to show the features of the human/animal it represents. It would be at least the size of the human head or perhaps larger. It would normally be shield-like in shape.
2. Head mask (mask as the head) which might be helmet like. This would be a three dimensional mask worn over the head as a helmet and would perhaps have some form of decorative crown-piece, or basketwork, or other ornamental work on it.
3. Mask resembling headdress. Headdress masks would be worn on the top of the head or forehead and may be more decorative in function in terms of the whole costume worn by the individual.
4. Perforated-bodied mask, where the mask is an integral part of a full dress 'uniform', the whole covers the entire body of the wearer. For instance the illustration after page 11.

This covering of the face has the special function of changing the nature of the man (wearer) -- transforming him into a being of the ritual-spiritual world. Examples are difficult to allocate, but the form appears more important at this point than specific examples.

A mask may be hanging or suspended which might take two forms:

1. shield-like mask (as in the above four forms) but worn on the head.
2. pendant mask worn perhaps on the belt or clothing.

These may be used as 'passport' type units whereby an identifying function is made for the unit. These may be small and would not

usually be expected to be more than human head size at most.

The mask may also be used as an integral part of a constructed arrangement for instance in A below:

- A. Ornamental masks -- which may be purely ornamental as in a house or perhaps on a totem pole feature etc..
  - 1. mask on utensils -- on a knife, axe for example.
  - 2. mask for architectural construct: finial mask -- masks placed at the pinnacle of an architectural feature ie the gable.
    - antefixa mask -- mask-like ornament place so as to conceal the ends of roofing fixtures.
- B. Death mask -- may be made from the head directly by impression or be a mask used for death rites.
- C. Mask of human head -- (skull as raw material) this uses the skull as the raw material and would normally be used in a symbolic/ornamental object not worn.
  - 1. skull mask -- skull used as raw material.
  - 2. shrunken human head.

#### 2.b. OCCASION: MASK USAGE

The mask is used in relation to several main social functions, the first of which is the magical or ritual setting. Primitive society has an intricate structure of rites for which appropriate clothing has been developed (ie masks and corporal decoration), a tendency which extends even in modern society. These rites cover activities like:

- 1. warfare: this would include ceremonies accompanying war and which are aimed at the protection of the individual in battle, the acquisition of help from the ancestors and gods for the group as a fighting unit.

2. rites of intensification: form a large group in the ritual life and are accompanied by their particular genre of mask types. These masks are found in two major groups relating to a). the fertility rite mask, which would be used in conjunction with the attempt to ensure the fertility of women and even men; fertility is an important factor in marriage and the sustaining of marriages. The aspect is so important that a system of rituals developed to ensure the help of the ancestors in assuring the fertility of the wife and/or husband. The second group included as an aspect of intensification is b). the increase rite, this relates to the growing of crops and other agricultural activities. The reasons for this types of rite are obvious and are aimed at ensuring the survival of the group from starvation.
3. rites of passage: the process of life is filled with transitional phases which are themselves filled with dangers from which individuals as initiates into the next phase of life need protection. In order to provide this protection the individual needs to be disguised, or to transpose, himself into the 'ritual gap' between the real and spirit world. These rites range from puberty and further advance in the social structure to rites of initiation into the shaman, or other secret religious societies.

The last of these mask types is the ancestor cult mask which may be used in a great many rituals such as funerary wear or as memorial service masks.

There are several secular occasions at which the mask can be used and these may be grouped as follows:

1. in relation to folk tale enactments.
2. amulet masks (charms, protection against illnesses).
3. seasonal ceremony masks.
4. building ceremony masks.

The functions of these are fairly self explanatory.

Finally there are the purely secular masks, which may have no very important spiritual significance, but perform a function on a lower level rather like street numbers or badges etc..

1. frolic mask.
2. signal mask.
3. food-obtain technique mask.
4. authoritative emblem mask.
5. apparel mask.
- 6 decorative art mask.

Though there may be overlaps between the groupings given above, the separation into these different types represents the types of work in use in primitive societies around the world.

#### 2.c. SPECIAL ACTIVITY

There are several specific effects created by masks, some appear along with others and some appear singly. These will not be separated out here, but, rather, simply listed and described. The first of these is the function as transformer of personality. This means that an individual wearing a mask, whatever rites it may relate to, will be recognised by others as a representative personality. He will become a spirit/god representing being, an antelope or lion -- whatever. There is some importance in this transposition as it relates to fears and superstitions which prevail. The spirit world has real power, and to leave a



real-world being open to abuse or capture by its denizens is undesirable. This leads to the next important function of the mask as a preserver of personality. In this sense we can view the mask as the keeper, as it were, of the spirit's personality, or the personality as a character in ritual. It may also be seen to preserve the personality of the individual.

Both the above aspects touch on the following two and the difference will become clear. The first is the mask as a means of concealment and protection. This can mean concealment from real-world people thereby making the man no longer part of the human group for the duration of the ritual. Thus the wearer is concealed from the human society. He is also concealed from the spirit world, particularly in the case of initiation ceremonies. These are separate effects, achieved for different reasons, but at the same time they are part of the same social moment and because of this are interdependents, the one following from the other. The 'take-over' of the human being by spirit beings is a real danger in many rites where the human is in limbo in the real world, as he is transferring into the next stratum of society. Naturally, the mask also protects actors who masquerade as god beings from being taken possession by the spirit being that he is enacting, or for which he is acting as medium of expression for. The above covers the item below, which is the mask as protective device. What we must remember here is that not all masks are worn. Some are not of wearable size, ie they are miniatures, or too large to wear like the Wango mask of the Mossi which may be 30 feet in height. They may also be amulets for luck, they may be protection against sickness, death, evil, and as mentioned previously, against spirit possession. There

are any number of forms protective devices could take.

The mask, in general then, is instrumental in the construction of the symbolic universe of the group in which it is in use. The symbolic universe being part of the societies thinking that explains causes and effects that are outside of the control of human beings. The symbolic universe houses the gods and demons of society, it is the cosmology of the group built up over the life-span of the society. This notion of symbolic universe will be returned to later in this study where the relationship between the symbolic universe/cosmology and the art of the people should become a little clearer.

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### CHAPTER 3: THE MEDIUM AND FORM OF AFRICAN ARTWORK

The traditional African artwork is, in the majority of cases, made of wood which in itself is a non-enduring material. Metals are found to a great extent but these are quite likely introduced materials. By whom-so-ever these materials were introduced is a matter of historical debate and archeological conjecture.

With the traditional material, wood, two major problems arise relating to the longevity of the work. Firstly, wood is the traditional diet of termites and borer beetles, so the harder woods are required to deter these insects. Softer woods, of which masks are mostly made, (with the exception of the curio type commercial brand) are highly susceptible to this deterioration. The second problem is cracking. As the wood dries after cutting it will crack, unless treated specially, this either destroys the item, or at least destroys its aesthetic effect. Whether this damage affects the spiritual or religious value of the work is not clear, but, as the working life-span of individual pieces tends, with some exceptions to be short, new masks being made frequently, this damage may not be a very important factor.

Some masks may only be displayed every 60 years, or 7 years, a time period which depends on the ritual time scale of the group. Certain rituals, as in Dogon, with their imina na (great mask) which is only displayed every 60 years. The mask is carved as a refuge for the spirit of the first member of the tribe to die. The original mask deteriorated beyond repair over a 60 year period and a new one was made. Another such mask is

the kakilambe mask of the Baga, Guinea, which is only displayed every 7 years.

Traditionally the African sculptural work is made with adzes. There being several forms, as there are several chisel forms in modern tool ranges. In recent times modern steel adzes and machetes have been introduced by European traders. The adzes themselves may be artworks. Some Congo tribes, according to William Fagg, carve their adze handles as well. One motif being the issuing of the blade itself from the mouth of a human head, suggesting the exhalation of the human expression. The blade also might be decorated.

Styles of sculptural design may differ in as much as individuals and even village aesthetics differ. This may be affected by the nature of the wood or other material used. Generally, the approach is bold, the work boldly carried out. It is probably from this that the cubistic element and proportions come. The process of working is from general features to specific ones, this being dictated by developing from adzework to knifework. Works might develop in two directions: that of 'cutting down' by elimination as with wood, ivory and stone, or by 'building up' as with pottery and metal casting. The first, subtractive, method imposes greater restrictions on the artist. The tendency among artists being that men work sculptures and women work pottery.

Fagg says:

The difficulties of describing or interpreting African art in verbal terms arise largely from the fact that it is in itself on the whole non-descriptive (unlike European art): the things with which it is concerned are the things which are beyond speech, and the artist is expressing

things which it would never occur to him to try to put into words. In short, the 'language' of African art is 'sculptural' in the fullest sense. European sculpture (including most modern sculpture) is, on the other hand, often only part 'sculptural', being in part also literary or quasi-literary both in purpose and treatment.

4

Father Placides Tempels feels:

African art is conditioned by their ontology, that is, their theory of the nature of being: for them being is a process and not a mere state, and the nature of things is thought of in terms of force or energy rather than matter; the forces of the spirit, human, animal, vegetable and mineral worlds are all constantly influencing each other, and by a proper knowledge and use of them a man may influence his own life and that of others.

5

Previously naive superstitions now come to be regarded as 'stop-valves' in the primitive understanding of natural phenomena, 'are in fact part of a coherent and logically ordered system'. (6)

There is then, an underlying doctrine of force uniting African sculptors into a system of concepts. There are three main concepts here each with appropriate art forms incumbent. The worship of spirits and gods, the cults of the ancestors, and the direct harnessing of energy through charms and fetishes constitute these concepts which are in fact not discrete entities but elements of the single system.

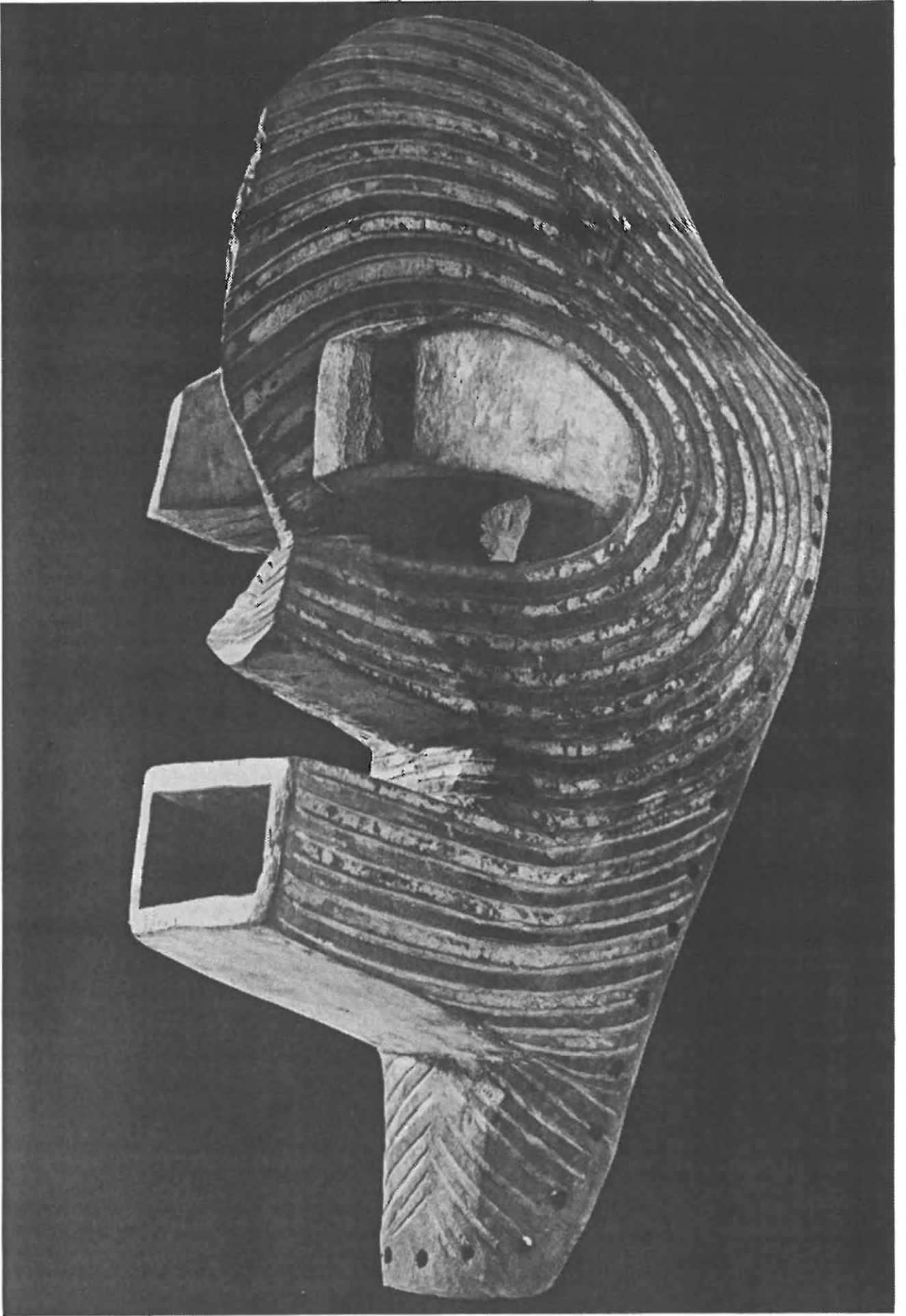
All purely African art is rooted in ancestor worship. For the agricultural tribes the symbol of the plant and seed, representing the regrowth of life out of death, has come to determine their conception of the world, and the whole of their art is rooted in this philosophy of life.

7

Fagg states that:

The influence of belief on form is not only a difficult and at present speculative field of study but perhaps also one of the greatest potential value for a deeper understanding of Negro art.

8



Fagg's note is based on the occurrence of what mathematicians refer to as exponential or logarithmic curves. The curves apparent in African art are equivalent to spirals which intersect all their radiants at the same angle. These curves are better recognised by non-mathematicians in the growth curves of tusks and animal horns.

These excrescences are used by tribal peoples in all parts of the world as symbols of fertility (in pursuit of which so many of their ceremonies are conceived) because they so patently embody a principle of growth or increase. They are often used as more or less faithfully represented in African sculpture: but we are less concerned here with such direct representations than with the assimilation of the exponential curve by African carvers (Notably the Ibo and Ibibio) as an important element in sculptural rhythm -- not of course from any respect for or knowledge of mathematics but rather from an intuitive appreciation of its inherent beauty and of its affinity with the ideas of increase and of vital force. Moreover, mathematical analysis of African sculptures would probably show that the relation between many exaggerations of human features in terms of those features themselves can be expressed in terms of exponential co-ordinates, so that although the exponential curve is not directly in evidence it has nevertheless supplied the principle of growth which has produced the sculptural form;....

9

The depth of essence in African maskwork and sculpture derives greatly from the deep involvement of man in the creation of the piece. Long apprenticeships are served, the artist must pay his dues, as it were, with a multitude of the trivial and menial tasks, that form the base of the relationship with the work and the gods. Once this has been served the effect of the mask begins with the spiritual contact between the sculptor and the wood material, developed through the teachings of the master craftsman. The work seems to have come from outside the sculptor.

Because of this deep spiritual involvement with the work the power of the individual pieces is all the greater. The

integration of the spirit world with that of men is deeply fixed within the work through which the process works. We have of necessity to always bear in mind the artist when talking or writing about African sculpture even when merely contemplating the piece itself.

Maskwork raids the real world of personality, it derives personality from real world values, the latter itself a creation of man. This paradoxical creation within creation gives vent to the human attempt at explanation of unexplained phenomena, one of which phenomena is the spiritual life within the mask or ritual factored object.

The reaction to maskwork which shows how the viewer identifies the spirit quality of the work: that is, the realization that the work is an active and not a passive one within society; stems from the natural 'mathematical' base on which the work is founded. A common thread of growth (active) forms offset by the movement (physical locomotion) of the mask in masques (when the gods walk among men) seems to exist between all societies allowing clear recognition of ritual factored or spiritually loaded objects despite unfamiliarity with the cultural background. It is quite clear to viewers outside of the original cultural group when a maskwork is ritually factored or not, but, all are non-the-less symbolically loaded.

Mention must be made of the ritual factored artefact, other than the mask, as well. In this category there are several forms of statuettes that are used in the ritual context, these are the ancestor figures and sometimes animal representations as well.



A brief over view of a few of the tribal areas in which masks are made follows. It is by no means complete, describing a few randomly selected areas, but may give indications as to the general nature of the tribal situation of maskworks.

DOGON Dance masks made by the Dogon are geometric in form and have an ascetic element to them. Often they have figures on the crown and the tendency is to represent animals. Masks are first anointed in ceremony. In some cases the wearer must be protected from the effects of the life-force of the tree from which the mask is made. This might be done by the inclusion of a piece of iron in the make-up of the masks. This fact shows as well that materials are not always used for purely aesthetic reasons.

The Dogon are unusual in that they have a specialist mask-making society : the awa. A boy will become a member of this society after circumcision, he will be taught to make and use a mask, with which he will wear a special costume made of red dyed plant fibre. The awa is a cult to which all adhere and it therefore pulls a much fragmented society together.

The Dogon great mask (imina na) is the principle Dogon mask. This mask is said to house the spirit of the first member of the tribe to die and who is said to have died in the shape of a snake. The mask is remade every sixty years during the sigui festival in each village. It is a narrow wooden board up to 30 feet in length with the mask at the bottom end. It is displayed during the sigui festival as it cannot be worn, it may also be displayed at the hut of a recently deceased member of the tribe for a while. The mask fits well into the spiritual being form

of mask, celebrating and ancestor spirit, it is also clearly an ornamental mask.

Masks are important in funerary rites among the Dogon. The imina na masks are fairly rare, but, besides these, there are several other face masks. These other masks may be used in burial rites by individual actors, or they may be used to drive the ancestral spirits away from the statuettes that stand on the roofs of the huts. These latter masks implore the ancestor spirit to go to the land of manga: the land of the dead. There is no restriction on these masks for the artist and it may be either animal in subject or human. The life-force of the animal can be imposed on the mask by the use of paint colours associated with that animal, decoration in the form of geometric patterns in red, black or white can be included. Most works have horns or rudimentary horns.

The kanaga masks have a large and elaborate crownpiece on them which may be a stylized crocodile. All Dogon masks are stylized often being reduced to a basic form which is square with two vertical notches with four or three cornered eye-slits.

BAMBARA Though having been under Islamic influence for some time the Bambara have maintained a great deal of the traditional life and religion. Statues, masks and the headdresses (suguni kun) are the main masks from this tribe. Secret society ceremonies account for the masks and the headdresses which are worn in festivals and traditional dances. The Ntomo society is an example, this society protects children, who belong to it until they move on to an adult society. The Ntomo mask represents

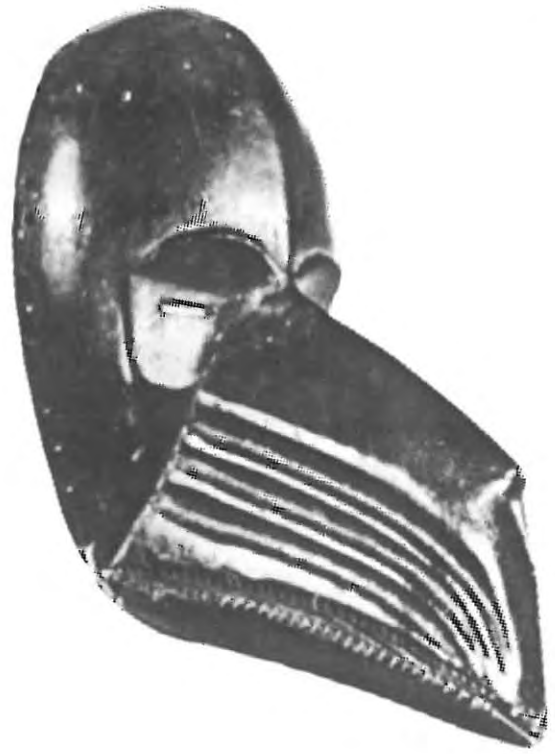
a 'benevolent demon' with stylized human face surmounted by a row of two to eight straight horns. It may be decorated with shells and red seeds and perhaps a female figure in between the horns.

The headdresses are striking and are often surmounted by an antelope, they are of great variety and inventiveness. These represent and celebrate the spirit chiwara who brought agriculture to the Bambara. Chiwara is half human half antelope. The chiwara dance is performed by young men of like age group before sowing of the crops. Their movements reflect the movements of antelope which are revered as rulers of the plains since ancient times.

The Ntomo mask is a secret society initiation mask and it is destroyed after the ceremony, as opposed to the imina na which is used for 60 years. The mask symbolizes episodes of the creation myth. It has eight horns representing the eight seeds of grain from which God made the world. The wearer is dressed in red representing the bringer of disorder to the world (the god's eldest son) who formed the world and stole the eight seeds of grain in order to possess the universe. The mask may show a female figure between the horns, who is the twin sister of the eldest son and inventor of agriculture. Cowrie shells may be used to represent the challenger of disorder who is victorious and restores order to the universe by regaining the eight seeds.

DAN/NGERE The masks of the Dan complex of tribes are soft toned angular forms which are fragmented and composed of dissociated

6



6a



features, they can range from humorous facial expressions to austere styles.

The Dan believe an anthropomorphic being called zlan ruled life on earth and created all things. Ancestors are the best link with zlan, they can communicate the will of the gods and be the rewarders or punishers of man. The link is created through the Go-priests who derive their power from the Go fetish -- an object composed of supernatural elements -- the power of which is enhanced by the burial of ancestors in his hut. Here too are kept masks also imbued with supernatural powers.

Masks are only owned by men and can be inherited or commissioned only on the authority of the Go-priest. It is private property but it may only be displayed on the order of a priest. Through the inheritance of the mask several generations of ancestor power can be accumulated in a mask. Supernatural powers are given form in a mask and during display the wearer too is seen as a supernatural being. The mask may be a fetish or be worn in which case it conjures up the ancestor spirits and supernatural beings.

YORUBA Yoruba no longer make their terracotta works and bronze is used seldom now. Wood has become their major material resulting in the fact that the more recent works of the Yoruba have disappeared through deterioration leaving only the very recent works for scrutiny. The Yoruba artist's main theme is the mask which takes the form of elaborate pyrimidals of anthropomorphic forms extending above the head of the wearer.

The base fits over the head of the wearer and is disguised

beneath a mass of small figures. These masks are sometimes heavy and they honour the several gods of Yoruba religion. Warrior masks are solemn and depict riders on diminutive horses. The use of the horse as an element indicates the link with the more northerly tribes towards the Sudan.

BAULE Two types of mask are made by Baule artists, one a human faced, and the other an animal headed mask. The first attempts contact with Gu, the ruler of the world in the Baule pantheon. The general buffalo headed animal masks make contact with kakagye another divinity.

The Gu mask is a low relief polished mask, grooves indicate hair and the eyes are almost closed beneath delicately arched eyebrows. The mouth is low relief with straight, sharp featured nose. It narrows at the base and is often bearded and sometimes surmounted by a crownpiece of either horns or human, animal or bird figures in the round.

Some kakagye or guli masks representing buffalo or antelope closely resemble the Gu masks in style. Others are simply discs whose eyes are cylindrical forms bulging from the surface. Curved horns and a rectangular mouth are very stylized. The stylized simplicity of these workds is their essence.

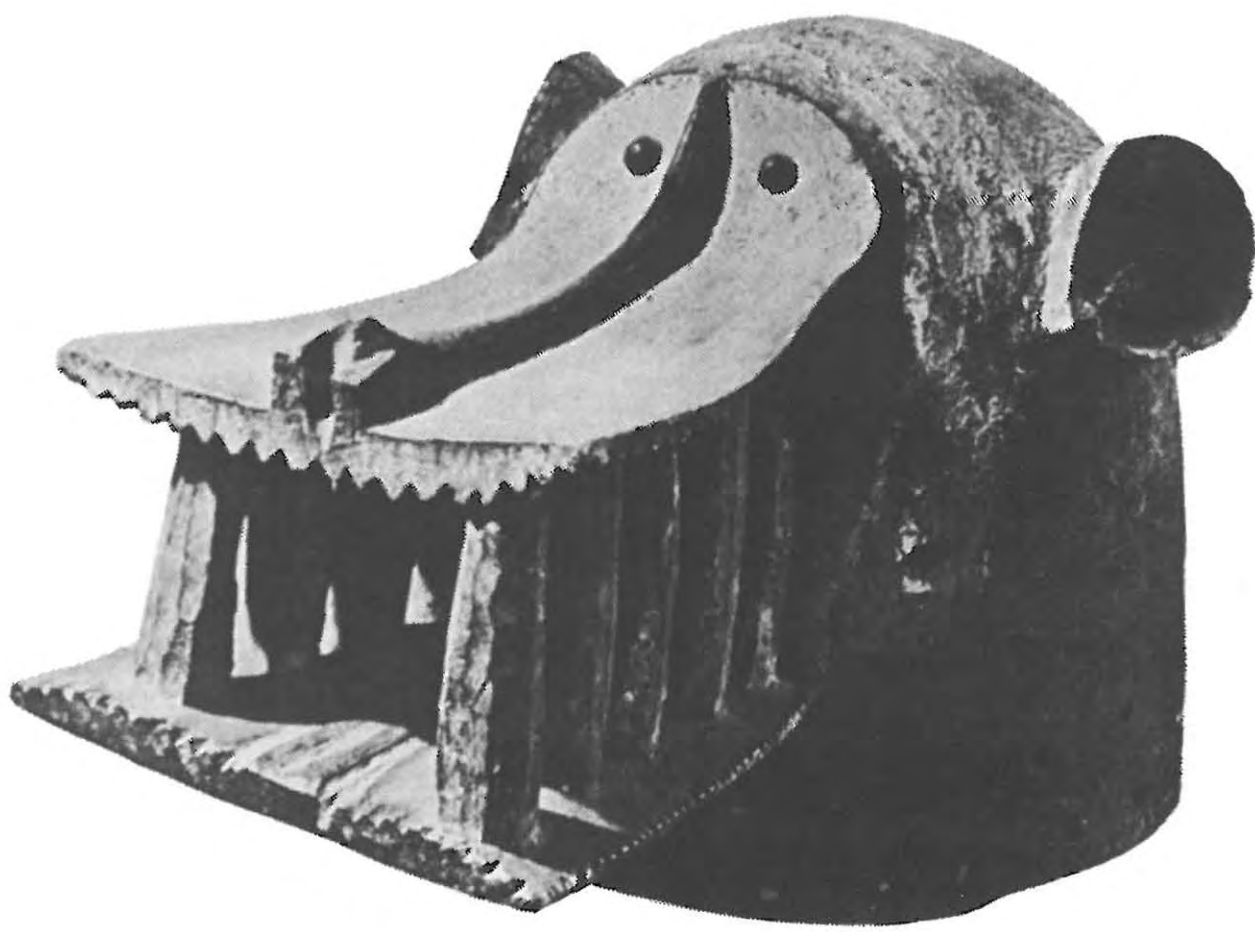
SENUFO Senufo use stylized animal masks. Some of these are composites and have crown features, these might consist of an animal form mounted on the forehead or top of the head, these features though are not universal. More humanistic forms appear as well and these may include animals, or animal parts as

crown pieces.

BAYAKA,BAPENDE,BUSHONGO This groups comes from the central west coast of Africa which borders on the Kasai river on the one side and Angola on the other. The dance masks from this area are more abstract and often decorative elements are evident. The use of multi-media is prominent and the facial features are often animal or highly abstract humanoid in aspect.

A selection of photographs is included throughout as an aid to orientating to styles described.

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#### CHAPTER 4: A LANGUAGE STRUCTURE FOR MASKWORK

Man has embroidered relationships with the elements over the years in an attempt to bring the creation and destiny of Homo sapiens into focus for the general population. This has resulted in a form of representation which stimulates the response of the eye first. These relationships take the form of objects; these objects are used to place values, which will have meaning to members of social groups, on the extra-real, or extraterrestrial, and supernatural levels. The objects are art pieces manufactured as ritually factored objects, their effect is to add a visual element to a mental activity -- the performance of rituals.

The relationship involving ritual factored objects takes the form of dramatic enactments based on mythologies which are fictionalized attitudes to the acquisition of life (creation), knowledge, and death (destiny). Though these are 'fictional' attitudes they have real components taken from the real history of peoples and form a part of society which members of the group take in all seriousness. These fictions are important elements of the social and historical biography of the living cultures.

The relationship between art and mythology should be examined along with the relationship these create with society in order to discover the function of mythologically orientated art in society. As mythological representations are semiotic in form: they are signifiers, and should be functional by their nature; there can be a case for its being a structural form underlying society's structures. The mythological representation is a signifier of important aspects of social rules, and, importantly, signifies the ancestors who 'enforce' moral rules, a function normally

outside of the power of humans. The use of the word sign in this context does not deny the symbolic nature of an object of art but, rather, distinguishes that object as a part of the mechanism of the society. A distinction is made here between sign and symbol. The sign is treated as a structural unit which is made into a symbol by the meaning it gains within a communications system.

Symbolicness, then, is placed on the level of semantics, or meaning, and sign is on the level of syntax, or structure, which underlies meaning. It is a post showing where on the map of social structure we are and yet, still, by its very position tells us the significance of being there. The signifying nature of representations may be related to syntactic structures in linguistic forms, they are the verbs, nouns, determiners of the phrases and sentences, as it were, of social structure. Their syntactic structures contain semantic implications and there is a semantic aspect to all artefacts in the representative function they perform.

We can take an example of a mythological representation as a signifier to expand on the above ideas. For instance, a dance mask worn by an individual in the enacting of a mythologically significant story. (The Nmwo society mask for example). This mask signals to onlookers the nature of the actor's position in the social milieu in both the real world and that of the mythology being enacted. The onlookers also see in the form of the mask a symbolically loaded sign which tells them the underlying nature of the enacted being. This underlying nature may be evil or good as well as the meaning attached to the mythological being itself as a religious-historical entity.

In this case the mask can be seen as a sign showing the place of

the individual wearing it in the group at that time, and by virtue of this position the individual takes on a symbolic nature as well. So the mask (sign) signals a position, and by signalling that position shows the significance of the position (its symbolic meaning) to the spectator.

#### 4.a. POSITION FOR MASKWORK IN SOCIETY

Sympathetic magic and 'art for art sake' have been used in explanation of the art of prehistoric times, and in some cases that of primitive artwork periods as well. The archeologists Lewis-Williams and Vinnecombe have shown that the more likely explanation lies elsewhere. They have used the cave paintings of South Africa to show that these painters were airing the mythological attitudes, and not necessarily attempting a magical enhancement of the fertility of nature, and/or people:

Myth serves to validate primitive society, its norms heirachy and customs. It brings us close to the heart of a people: myths are the essence of metaphysics, not its manifestation as are shrines, taboos and rites. Like great poetry, myths communicate without their being fully understood; they take the place of abstraction. Three functions of myth will be considered in connection with the paintings (in this essay, masks): the elucidation of man's relationship with nature; the validation of social action; and the resolving of tensions and fear.

10

This primitive society can be distinguished as the earliest one to begin making relationships between things of the inanimate world and the animate world, and that of the world outside of the human realm.

Masquerades, enacting myths and special historical events, and ancestor rites have been a part of human society for thousands of years. These are the manner of man's relationship with his universe and environment. They are on the same level as

prehistoric myth-making images and operate as indicators of the nature-culture relationship, validating of social action and resolving of tensions. The use of masks and other artefacts in applying metaphysical argument must be more important in the social fabric than early writers on the subject have suggested. To relegate these objects to the level of 'art for art sake' or sympathetic magic does not seem to bear justification. Art work by its nature expresses the artist's attitudes and opinions towards his environment, even the cave paintings give us indications of such attitudes. In a time when the environmental conditions meant a great deal to the human group, and men certainly shifted to where the conditions were better, it is hard to assume that cave wall paintings were performed simply for the sake of doing it. Pure decoration appears to be the province of modern men who are not nomadic by necessity. Environmental conditions were no less important to the men of primitive culture, their masks and ritual objects play an even more direct role in rituals aimed at, and linked with, environmental enhancement. The usage of these objects must signify something in the already well constructed world of ritual activity. The form of masks, in particular, can tell us through their, perhaps fearsome nature, or their incorporated elements, something of the benevolent or malevolent nature of the rite. They constitute a graphic sign with a symbolic meaning and denotation. The nature of signifying is to use objects from the tangible world in conceptual thought. These graphic compositions, or signs, 'are arranged and manipulated in myths in which their symbolic meaning is more important than their denotation'. (11) Ritual factored objects are arranged in rites in the same way, but where they contribute, by their denotations, to the symbolic meaning of the rite which has its base in myth.

An onlooker at a mask ceremony can react sensitively to the beauty or ugliness of a mask and to the action of the ceremony in its various exciting, solemn or humorous stages. He sees file past him events in the history of the universe in an order which corresponds to the stages of the cosmology. At the same time he is aware of a manifold yet orderly system of cosmic symbolism in the masks, to which rhythm, dance and song are closely related. But the onlooker participates above all through the degree of his knowledge, and the pleasure of the young dancer or the uninitiated onlooker differs radically from the excitement of the initiate, who enjoys the magical experience of sharing with his equals the secret which makes them all one with the universe.

12

## 4.a.1

Lewis-Williams suggests that, in viewing cave art in particular, there are certain social aspects to be considered that are important. (13)

Pictures in caves show that men disguised themselves while hunting and the practice of painting the body, or dressing the body, for ritual purposes seems to have derived from this, and is still in use today for hunting and ritual purposes. (Allied to this is camouflage worn by men at war). This becomes part of the religious system of societies describing the universe to young and old. The animals of the real world often become the representations of god-beings and ritual masqueraders dress in representative costumes. This action changes the nature of the actor in the ritual, creating a transfer into a separate personality which is enacted, but no less real to the social group.

Men make masks, and art works representing spirit world beings, to identify themselves with the spirit world. Through these they cross-over to another world, one in tandem with the real world, and be in contact with the spirits on a temporary basis. In

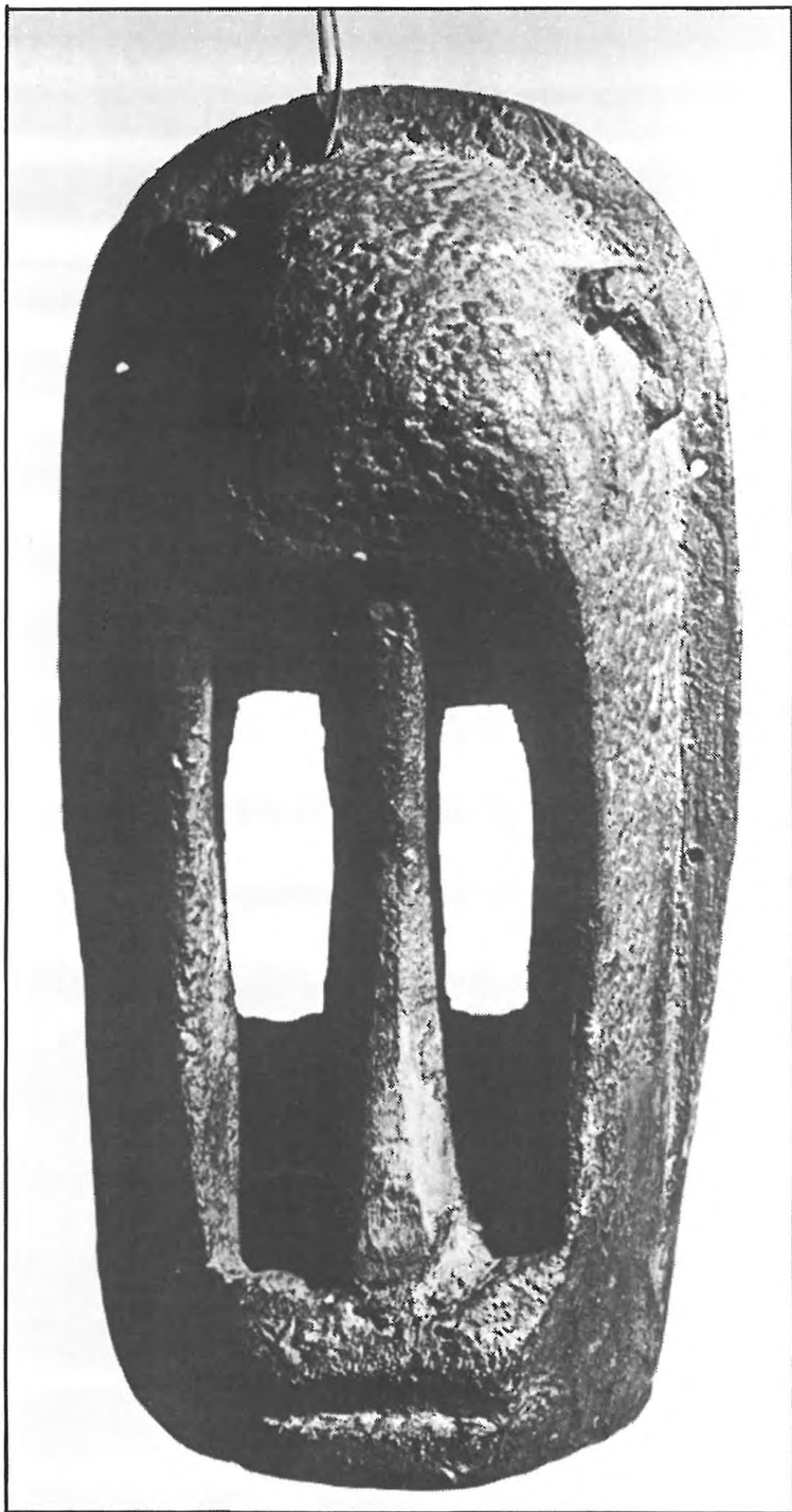
this way they attempt to influence the spirit world in its supposed dealings with, and over, the real world. The transition from the real world to the spirit world must be a one-way traffic, as the dead are visibly unable to cross-back into real time. This activity denies death to the ancestors by keeping them within contact for the real world and making them still a part of the real world. One of the paradoxes of this system is that the real world people make equally elaborate attempts to banish the ancestors to the spirit world. In speaking of the universe and the relationship between man and universe, one must include man's immediate environment, Willett points out:

Human history until the latest phases is very largely the story of man's interaction with his environment. In many cases his art is used in ceremonies intended to control the environment, for example, in the Bambara dance headdresses which represent the spirit chi-wara who in the form of an antelope introduced the knowledge of agriculture; the dances, performed in pairs by young men at the time of planting, are to ensure germination and a good harvest.

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The headdresses are tools for the playing out of mythical stories of origin/creation, death, the deliverance of knowledge by the gods. These myths 'exist only as elements embodied in a tradition and they are anonymous; they come from nowhere, as it were'. (15) Myth is an interdependent with ritual and is interwoven with all types of activity in the group. (16) This comment is restated in Kluckhohn from the discussion by Malinowski who studied myth in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski's own discussion appears as Myth in Primitive Psychology (1926). As an extension to these ideas there is data showing the Dogon carvers appease a tree's spirit before cutting their wood and the act of carving is surrounded by rituals.

In the case of sculptures which are to be a home for spirits, such as the masks and ancestor figures of the



Dogon it is easy to see that a conflict between two forces inhabiting the wood needs to be avoided. Among the Dogon the life force of the tree is controlled by driving little iron hooks into the mask, since the life force of the iron is more powerful than that of the wood. Yet even where no late spirit occupation is involved, as in Yoruba drums, and even in the case of secular objects like stools, the spirit of the tree needs to be propitiated.

17

## 4.a.2

Studies of myth show it is a deeply ingrained part of society particularly oral societies where traditional and cultural heritage is passed on through the generations by word of mouth. Though bodies of seemingly unconnected mythical stories and themes are found in cultural settings, an overview of the whole body of stories, uncovers a central theme and a common origin. The divergence of themes and sequences is characteristic of mythological thought, but this is purely a function of the irradiation lines of connection to the origin point of the story. (18) The importance of myth in the social setting is given substance by the fact that social groups have found a need to make enactments (masquerades) of these stories. In this way the continuation of the historical background in the memories of the group is facilitated. The divergences occur because of the individual additions and subtractions of the tale-tellers in their separate settings. The enactments of mythology is a common aspect of African societies, often a particular type of dance mask is used, as among the Dan for instance.

The mask (on gallery display) shows the variety of iconographic elements common in the Mande-speaker's masks. Its form is basically that of an idealized mask oval with a median line down the forehead. But the human face has been conflated with a bird-like beak and wider slit eyes so that the mask is neither human nor bird. In this case the human qualities appear to predominate, but in many other entertainment masks of this type, the bird features are exaggerated. The dancers who wear these masks imitate the movements of the birds in flight. They sing and recount passages of Dan mythology.

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These enactments of these stories are a highlighting point of the nature of oral societies which require a ritualized manner of perpetuating their history, in the same way as modern written histories form a type of ritualized element of modern society. When primitive men are enacting their histories they play out the roles of the characters of their histories. This is where the decorative and plastic arts form an important part of the social structure. Primitive man, it has been noted, can mentally convert himself into the being he is portraying. His knowledge of the animals of the surrounds is so good he in fact 'becomes' a lion, snake, etc.. Whenever the enactments of primitive myths have been studied the reality of the fictional moment has been emphatic. Fictional situations become real for the period of the enactments and remain so in memory. This reality possibly occurs because portions of real history are contained in the story. The costume of masks and other clothing with the formalized ritual dances reinforces the social histories and rules.

In Malinowski's words:

...an intimate connection exists between the word, mythos, the sacred tales of a tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organisation, and even their practical activities, on the other.

20

During this enacting of 'historical-mythological' events there is the invitation to the ancestors to attend the ceremony. The inclusion of figurines and masquerades is an attempt to show that the ancestors are in attendance, by proxy. The masquerader is attended by ritual factored items of dress or ornament that convey the sense that they past is being brought into the present. The Senufo of the Ivory Coast and Mali use ancestor figure which provide communication with the ancestors.

These seated female figures and possibly the standing female figures are associated with fertility and, therefore with the 'recent' ancestors. Female ancestor figures have decorative hairstyles which imitate the profile of the hornbill and provide a link in iconography with Ka-Tyeleo. The groups of three markings on either side of the mouth and round the umbilicus refer to the three stages of initiation. The emphasis on the breasts and navels of these figures signifies their importance in connection with fertility. Senufo ancestor figures may only be made after consultation with the diviner, and they are used as a medium through which one can communicate with the ancestors.

21

The principle of cosmology in society is to explain the universe and its phenomena for the social group. The indication is that artistic representation on the level of ritual is both illustrative and narrative. Having these two aspects the symbolic-indicative function of representations is in keeping with the general nature of ritual objects of art. This general nature shows up the organisational inter-relationship between the mythical-cosmological world and the real world of people. This means that ritual factored artefacts form an intricate system of social indicators denoting status in the real world. There is besides this the memorial function in which ancestor factored art is ceremonially used to underline the influence of the ancestral spirits on the real world. This art is related to the universal and symbolic aspects of the social-religious system.

In his book The Dawn of Art Karel Kupka, writing about Aboriginal art has this to say in relation to the act of art:

The very act of painting and engraving is a ritual act. In it the 'dreaming', the life-giving myths, break through into the present from the heroic past, what was, is, whenever it is re-enacted, and the visual arts and the chanting and 'dreaming' are ways in which this is done.

22

Here Kupka describes a link between the world of the past and that of the image-making artist. The myth breaks into the present, it

is the basis for the structural form of the present social system. The transposition of past into the present is required as a form of 'visible' precedent showing the origin of the status quo and why it must be maintained. In this way a constant though flexible reality is maintained.

The ritual object is one of the means which fosters the social reality and its role in society is both real and symbolic in the ceremonial life of the social group. Duerden (1974) has shown that African art functions on a level which enables men and women who have links with their gods through their being the innovators in their society to function better within the group. Among the Gelede:

...masks also have a more social orientation in that they are used during the nocturnal social criticism and prophecy called Efe; entertainment during funerary rites; commemoration as well as for pure aesthetics and entertainment, and creativity.

23

The donning of masks helps the individual to show the conflicts within a society grouping in a masquerade. Some masquerade rituals allow the youth to enact their criticism of the group without retribution from the elders. This forms the 'proper channels' and the mechanism overflows into ritual ceremony of the spiritual world and with their ancestors through masquerades. Their relationship to the spiritual world is shown in their representations of animals: birds, chameleons, leopard. The significance of the last two in particular lies in the chameleon's ability to change colour -- infinite adaptability; the leopard's spots allow good camouflage for a very powerful animal -- again, representing adaptability in the environment, elements which the good leader should show, or represent.

There can be found in the relationship of art and society a strong juxtaposition. This art of primitive man was used to create contrasting elements of the way in which personalities enacted social roles. The social role of an individual is a changing entity used to make relationships with other individuals according to the particular needs of the time. Artefacts create the same fictional personalities among the group which are made to fit different social necessities. Faces in social groups are ever changing and so are those of mythological beings which have many ways of relating to the real world. Notably, human and spirit world beings have the propensity to change in order to suit the needs of the time. The destruction, or hiding, of the used mask and the subsequent creation of a new one expresses the changing nature of the faces of mythological beings. This occurs among the Dogon, for instance, where initiates make their own masks under the supervision of the elders, these are used during the initiation ceremonies and are discarded, or hidden, at the conclusion of the initiation school.

#### 4.a.3.

The significance of any representation is in its context 24  
 Lewis-Williams captures the most salient point about approaching the artefacts of social groups here. The social unit that makes representations must have ways to create meaningful contact with these representations. Representations cannot be meaningless. This contact is made through denotations imparted by myth-making contrasts, by juxtaposing real and fantasy elements. The juxtaposition is non-logical as the visual mind makes non-logical connections between graphic symbols. Visual representations are coped with in the medium of myth.

In graphic representation this process of non-sequential linking of symbols is possible; it cannot

be achieved in speech. In speech the juxtaposed symbols have to be linked grammatically. The syntax of speech imposes a sequential logic. It is not possible to say simply, 'Eland...man'. The medium imposes a sequence or linear logic and we have to say, 'The man hunts the eland', or, perhaps, 'The man enjoys the qualities of an eland'. In this example the logical connection is easily established. If the desire is to juxtapose 'Eland...honey', the situation is more complex, and the non-logical connection has to be established: 'The eland eats honey', or, 'The eland has honey rubbed on its flanks'. Although it is not a logical action to rub honey on the flanks of an eland, this becomes acceptable in the medium of myth because it imposes its own rules of logic and syntax. Graphic syntax, however, does not require these logical connections, and representations can be placed next to one another without them.

25

The ritual object and myth are the medium for the logic found in the form of ritual sequences. Masks and figurines form the sculptural medium for transmitting the messages of the group. These messages contain the rules and measures by which society makes the system structured. The structure has the logic of the graphic syntax of ritual. Visual memory assimilates the images and relationships made between the various masquerades in their masks. In this way the form of a social grouping and its content, or rules, is imparted into the group memory.

Masquerades create a juxtaposition of the graphic and real worlds. The two representations are able to go together easily through the graphic symbols inherent in the objects in use. The graphic world being the cosmological image society creates. This image incorporates the mythological beings and the reasons for the creation and ongoing sequences of life.

The feeling of kinship with the animals is also expressed in the paintings, as in the human figures that are partially animal and possibly in certain juxtapositions and superpositionings, the exact meanings of which is not clear yet. The practice of wearing animal masks, apart from the pragmatic value of hunting, also serves to express the same relationship, as did the mimetic dances. Special mention may be made of the half-man half-antelope at Willem's shelter and the man wearing an eland suit at Game Pass.

26

Myths and paintings, according to Lewis-Williams, perform similar functions and they 'arise from the same needs and drives'. They draw on a common store of symbols in the performance of these functions.

The symbol antedates both myths and paintings: it was not invented for the purpose of being used in either. The myths are a field in which symbols are manipulated, both media performing similar functions, but following syntactic rules peculiar to themselves.

27

Symbols have the message carrying quality that is required for the relationship between cosmological and real worlds to be developed in full. They are representations of the cosmological idea and appear as the manipulative element in the field of mythology. This field is the real-world link with the outside world of the mythological beings. The symbol is also a form of magical link in the world, magic is a symbolic language. Magic enacts the important, and relates the attitudes held towards particular aspects of life. Magic can be seen to operate on two levels, that of being purely instrumental, and that of making a value statement by expressive means.

The real question is: what do ritual factored objects say? One cannot treat them in isolation as they are related to all cultural aspects. There are three signs generated by the object of ritual significance: a linguistic signifier, or the local word for that object; a ritual signifier, or the being or subject itself; and finally the iconographic signifier, which is the object itself. (28)

In semiological terminology the signifiers together with their significance (the mental concepts) constitute the signs.

29

At this stage myth can be designated as a form, or a mode of signification, in this case its content is the world-view of the social group, or its cosmology. The ritual object in use becomes

a part of the communications system of mythology representing an element of the cosmological content of that system.

#### 4.a.4

The contribution of this system and these ritual artefacts can now be considered as they relate to the social milieu. To do this the work of two sociologists, working, together, can be examined. In a text on the phenomenon the authors call The Social Construction of Reality, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann study the mechanism through which a concept of reality is built up in society. These authors give this definition which is important to the sociology of knowledge.

It will be enough, for our purposes, to define 'reality' as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot 'wish them away'), and to define knowledge as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics.

30

The sociology of knowledge deals with the empirical variety of 'knowledge' in the social unit as well as the processes by which any body of 'knowledge' comes to be socially established as 'reality'. (31) The point of focus must be the relationship between the form of human thought and the social context within which it arises, this, say the authors, puts the focus on the existential determination of thought as such. Human thought is founded in human activity and the relationship created through this activity between members of the society. This relationship was described by Marx as the 'substructure' and 'superstructure' of society, the first being human activity and the second being the world produced by that activity.

The authors state that the sociologist Robert Merton put the

relationship described in Marx's terms above, in the following manner:

Merton's own concepts of 'manifest' and 'latent' functions are applied to the sphere of ideation, the distinction being made between the intended, conscious functions of ideas, and unintended, unconscious ones.

32

Further point to be made relating to the form the study of the spread of knowledge in society takes are contained below:

The theoretical formulations of reality, whether they be scientific or philosophical or even mythological, do not exhaust what is 'real' for the members of a society. Since this is so, the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, common sense 'knowledge' rather than 'ideas' must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist.

33

These comments on the sociology of knowledge place the function of ritual acts and artefacts in sharper focus. The substructural human activity of ritual artefact creation is a direct contribution to the superstructural end. If taken in Merton's terms the body of artefacts can be construed as a form of ideation which performs a manifest conscious function. To say unintended seems out of place, but when the deep structure is examined the end product of the creation of an artefact cannot have been calculated. In this sense 'deep structure' can be equated with 'latent meaning'. The field is too broad for the final effect an object has to be seen, except in an objective study of the whole phenomenon in the context of the broader social milieu. So, although the manufacturer of an artefact intends that object for a particular purpose, and it is made according to the rules governing an object of that sort, the final effect is dependant on the total field of communication between artefacts in use, and artefacts and spectators. This end is beyond

the intentions of the manufacturer. He cannot intend a particular effect on a broad scale, he can only intend a particular form. The content of ritual activity is generally an a priori fact with meanings that a newly made object merely fits.

The knowledge passed between members of society is based on activities built up over a period of time. The boundaries of this knowledge are social, moral, legal, and span from creation through life and its functions to destiny. This picture of knowledge is a society's reality, and its construction is ritualized in the activities of the group, though it is not necessarily formalized it is concrete and changeable through time.

The cosmology of a primitive is an integrated element of the social system of the group. The universe and its principles, and the micro-universe of the human social unit, rely on the natural world and the supposed social nature of the broader universe to develop their form. The universe is seen as inhabited by beings of mythological 'reality' -- gods and demons form their own society in human vision and this is the base for much of the form of human society. This reliance is latent within the function of the social unit.

CHAPTER 5: THE MASK: METAMORPHOSIS AS SOCIAL REALITY

In the past the art of the primitive society, especially that of African societies has been viewed on an elementary level. This has led to some false impressions of this art and latterly some revelations have fortunately dispelled many of these falsehoods. The major shift has been from a position of simple review and documentation to a deeper reading of the elements of art in relation to the society in which it appears. The complexity of the relationship between art and the social unit it is connected with appears when the underlying structure of the relationship is sought. The underlying structure can be found when the structural elements of the mytho-symbolic system are examined. The methods, or devices, shown in the foregoing are the key to a better understanding of art in the rapidly disappearing cultures of lesser technologically developed societies, namely Africa in this case.

We have looked briefly, in the first sections of this essay, at the physical, and thereafter in broader detail, at the spiritual medium of the mask. There is a large gap between these two facets of maskwork when they are looked at in isolation in this manner used above. The physical and spiritual join together in making up the final effect of masks in the usage situation. The physical form as described in chapter three, is the visible foreground of the maskwork. Whether the physical form is grotesque or 'soft' in its graphic character is what the spectator reacts to. For this to have any significance to the spectator, there must be a reference point in the spectator's mind. This reference is contained in the social reality built up over the years and to which the members of the group subscribe. The physical form must be noted, in however brief a manner, because of the integral part that it plays

in the legitimation process which makes the reality of society 'real' in the individual and social mind. In other words: in the present form of the society, without the mask and its attendant masquerades, there would have to be some other method of legitimating society's form. The masks, as a ritual factored object, and as a physical form with a specific set of rules as to its graphic nature and make up, is essential to the bond between man and his cosmological world.

There is a strong bond between man-made ritual factored objects and the cosmological unit that they might represent. The artefact is one of the modes of explanation used by the manufacturer to try and provide meanings in his own life and mind. In turn the artefact is also the mode of interpretation used by the researcher to explain the social-symbolic relationship that occurs in his area of study. By analysing the implicit significations of the artefacts as they are found in their settings, the cosmological idea will become clearer and the world-view can be established.

The art of primitive peoples has been the seat of the manifest mythology for thousands of years. A 'spiritual' conception is made in wood, or other materials, and the spiritual is the real world manifestation of the universe. The spirit world is the creation of man in an attempt to make the reason for his own existence real. In particular, the use of masks in masquerades is an attempt to marry the two worlds. Even the momentary realization of the spiritual in the world is enough to sustain a cohesive element in social units that live close to nature. This brief marriage is an integral factor in putting human society into a positive place in the universe. The mask itself

is a 'signifier', a 'word', that conjures up a concept. The concept is a mental image, a picture in ideational form of a part of the universe.

If it is accepted that the products of our culture are segmented and ordered in the same way as we conceive the products of Nature to be segmented and ordered, then to discover the nature of man who created art, we must attempt to understand how that man was related to Nature....Anxiety, induced by dependence on the unpredictable, is expressed through various ritual actions....Although ritual is the outward expression of inner religious concepts, it is hardly possible, in non-literate societies, to make any clear cut distinction between information expressed in verbal form and information expressed in non-verbal action.

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That men are a creation of 'nature' underlies their artistic representation of the animal world in ritual factored objects. The main points made by Lewis-Williams and Vinnecombe revolve around the fact that there is now enough ethnographic material gathered to make good comparative studies based on quantitative analysis of paintings and artefacts and the ethnographic material.

If the artefacts of African societies are examined most fall into the ritual-ceremonial bracket. There is a great deal of art that is related to initiation rites and other social rites that are important to the group structures of societies. The groups that have these initiation rites, or rites of passage, lay great importance on stressing the transfer from one social grade to the next. During the time any individual is undergoing the transitional process from one grade to the next higher one, he or she is in a non-human position, one of limbo. This means that the initiation must be protected from any unwanted influences. This includes protection from the people of the social unit involved, any unplanned influences can have disastrous consequences for the initiates.

The Bundu society is the Mende female equivalent of the Dan-Poro society. The helmet masks are used in initiations where the dancer is completely covered so that no opening except the slit for the eyes is visible in the costume, this is for protection against possession by demons. The mask embodies the force of a protective spirit but is represented as a female with fat rings around the neck, a sign of wealth.

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The initiates in some cases have no contact with any living, nor with any non-living, being. It is the intension of the human group to outwit the mythological beings so that they cannot cause the death of, or steal the spirit of, an initiate. The mask and corporal decoration is used to disguise the figure of an individual and avoid bad, or evil, influences of the real and spiritual world. The major point here is that during the time an initiate is undergoing this transition, he or she is in a different, intermediate part of the universe from other people. They cease to exist for the real world for the duration of the transition process, with the exception of ritually pure individuals who may deal with them.

The above is an example of the way in which the artefact can be taken as a deliniation unit for the researcher. It is the signifier that there is another world beyond the world of men. This is the world as men see it, as a directly related influence on themselves, there is also the indirectly related world indicated by ancestor related artefacts.

Ancestor art spans the fields of masks and figurines which are used in ceremonies and shrines. This is another indication of the manner in which social units have made representations of their universe. The ancestral world signifies a relationship that societies need to be able to understand, the nature of the happenings in the world. There is also the need for a way of contacting the world of the spirits and gods, and this is through

the ancestors who are in the same other world system as the gods. Demons are also found in this scheme and are also represented though perhaps not in such a public manner. There are also cult related ornaments which are an indication of the relationship that specific groups of people with a social unit have with beings the other world.

Levi-Strauss writing about eskimo and Kwakiutl multiple masks makes these comments:

Those masks with louvers, which present alternately several aspects of the totemic ancestors -- sometimes angry, at one time human, at another time animal -- strikingly illustrate the relationship between split representation and masquerades. Their function is to offer a series of intermediate forms which ensure the transition from symbol to meaning, from magical to normal, from supernatural to social. They hold at the same time the function of masking and unmasking.

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These comments are well suited to the African situation where the art of the ritual performs all these functions.

Turning finally to Berger and Luckmanns' Social Construction of Reality, the phenomenon of art and its relationship to cosmology through the medium of mythology can be looked at in the light of its roles as a legitimation technique in society. In their book the authors make the following statements, and arguments about the symbolic universe and its origins, they also deal with universe maintenance, a central theme of this essay.

Legitimation is defined by its functions:

The function of legitimation is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible the 'first-order' objectivations that have been institutionalized.

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The main motivation behind legitimation is the integration of the unit within which the action takes place. Integration and the correspondent question of subjective plausibility refer to two levels.

First the totality of the institutional order should make sense, concurrently, to the participants in different institutional processes....Secondly, the totality of the individual's life, the successive passing through various orders of the institutional order, must be made subjectively meaningful.

38

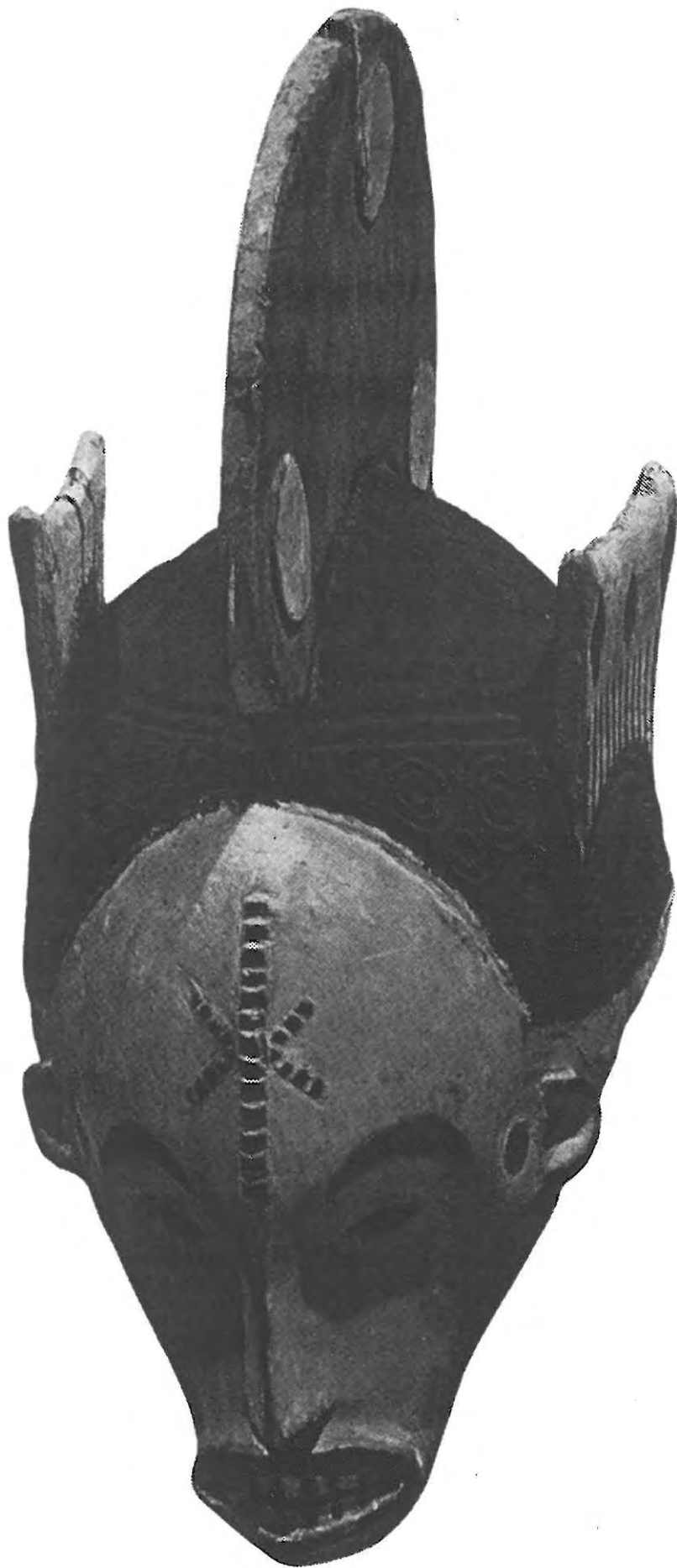
The end aim of legitimation is to explain the institutional order 'by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings'. Legitimation tells the individual why one action is acceptable over another as well as telling him why things are what they are. In other words 'knowledge' precedes 'value' in the legitimation of institutions. (39)

What has been dealt with in the foregoing essay is the symbolic universe of the social unit, which ever it may be. The symbolic universe being one of the levels of legitimation.

These are bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality, using the term 'symbolic' in the way we have previously defined.

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The symbolic process is one of significance referring to realities not including everyday experiences. (41) The entire history and biography of the individual takes place within the symbolic universe which is constituted out of the matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings. This includes the dreams and fantasies that are not included in everyday reality and which have a detached and peculiar reality of their own. The symbolic universe is 'nomic', or ordering in character, and renders the universe and fantasy, the real and most solitary experiences of men more intelligible and less terrifying as he passes from one reality to another. The symbolic universe as it is represented in the institutional order can retain its objective plausibility only if it is constantly protected against terror. 'To be nomic,



therefore, means to be deprived of this shield and to be exposed, alone to the onslaught of nightmare'. (42)

Hopefully, the study presented above has shown that the relationship between the art and cosmology of a social group is an important factor in the social programme of any such unit. These artefacts are the units which are used to create the social universe of the groups, and by adding a semantic element to that idea of the social through the creation of a symbolic universe, they are able to give a form of legitimate stability to the psyche of the group. There is an ethos-bearing function to ritual related artefacts in social use which gives signals and signs to society's inhabitants, pressing them into a cohesive unit through the medium of visual graphic language in which the artefact is a word.

The origins of a symbolic universe have their roots in the constitution of man. If a man in society is a world-creator, this is made possible by his constitutionally given world-openness, which already implies the conflict between order and chaos. Human existence is, ab initio, an ongoing externalization. As man externalizes himself, he constructs a world into which he externalizes himself. In the process of externalization, he projects his own meanings into reality. Symbolic universes, which proclaim that all reality is humanly meaningful and call upon the entire cosmos to signify the validity of human existence, constitute the furthest reaches of this projection.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lommel (1981) P7
- 2 Fagg (1958) P24
- 3 Linton, in Eliofson and Fagg (1958) P11
- 4 Fagg (1958) P24
- 5 Fagg (1958) P24
- 6 Fagg (1958) P24
- 7 Lommel (1981) P9
- 8 Fagg (1958) P24
- 9 Fagg (1958) P25
- 10 Lewis-Williams (1974a) P61
- 11 Lewis-Williams (1974a) P54
- 12 Lommel (1981) Pp43-44
- 13 Lewis-Williams (1979)
- 14 Willet (1971) P12
- 15 Levi-Strauss (1969) P18
- 16 Kluckhorn (1968) P145
- 17 Willet (1971) P168
- 18 Levi-Strauss (1969) P5
- 19 Nettleton and Vogel (1979) P11
- 20 Malinowski (1926) P96
- 21 Nettleton and Vogel (1979) P9
- 22 Kupka (1965) Pix
- 23 Nettleton and Vogel (1979) P15
- 24 Lewis-Williams (1974a) P53
- 25 Lewis-Williams (1974a) Pp59-60
- 26 Lewis-Williams (1974a) P63
- 27 Lewis-Williams (1974a) P63
- 28 Lewis-Williams (1974b) P102
- 29 Lewis-Williams (1974b) P102
- 30 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P13
- 31 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P15
- 32 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P23
- 33 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P27
- 34 Vinnecombe (1972) P193
- 35 Nettleton and Vogel (1979) P10
- 36 Levi-Strauss (1963) P262
- 37 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P10
- 38 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P110
- 39 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P111
- 40 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P113
- 41 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P113
- 42 Berger and Luckmann (1966) P110
- 43 Berger and Luckmann (1966) Pp121-122

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